UM will change its mass alert provider

Karyn Spory | Posted: Tuesday, May 28, 2013 2:00 pm

**Students and employees on the four campuses that make up the University of Missouri System will begin receiving emergency alert notifications from a new provider this fall.**

Terry Robb, director of information technology at MU, said the university will switch to using the mass notification service Blackboard Connect as an alert provider. The services will cost, for all four UM campuses, $77,000 per year for a one-year contract, with the option of two renewals.

The university began looking for a new provider because its three-year contract with previous system Cooper Notifications will end Aug. 27. Users already signed up for alerts through the university will not have to sign up again — their data will be transferred automatically.

Robb said a request for proposals — which required the vendor to be able to deliver messages via email, landline phones, cellphones, smartphones, pagers and devices for the deaf — was sent out in early December. Respondents to the request included Everbridge, Mir3, AT&T, Send Word Now Emergency Notification, Cooper Notification and Blackboard Connect.

Robb said besides meeting all of the minimum qualifications and having a good price, Blackboard was chosen because it offered the best data upload capability among the competing companies.

He said that with as frequently as people change phone numbers or service providers, having a vendor with a quick upload capability was important. Robb said having the best application programming interface "was definitely a feather in their cap."

Data integration had been an issue with Cooper, he said, and it proved troublesome with nearly 49,000 users on MU's network. Robb said as users would change their contact information, he would have to update that at MU — the information should have automatically updated on Cooper's database but did not, he said. Although he said the issue didn't affect users, taking the extra time to update information on both servers was an extra hassle for his staff.

Another issue came in the form of undelivered text alert messages, he said. "I'm the system administrator, and I would not get my texts," he said.
John Magee, a communications associate for Blackboard Inc., said Blackboard Connect lets students, faculty and staff specify through a secure portal what types of messages they receive. Blackboard Connect also can provide schools with crisis communications support in the event of a disaster or act of violence.

"As we work with schools all the time, we have a good hold on best practices in crisis communications for higher-ed institutions," Magee said in an email.

Magee said the company also works with other Southeastern Conference schools, including Arkansas, Georgia, Florida and Alabama, and with Concordia Seminary and Three Rivers Community College in Missouri. Blackboard also provides notification services for K-12 schools, corporations and government entities.
On May 24, 1813, Jane Austen went to a crowded art gallery on Pall Mall in London, looking for Mrs. Darcy. “I dare say Mrs. D. will be in yellow,” Austen wrote that morning to her sister, referring to the romantic heroine whose happy ending she had sketched out in “Pride and Prejudice,” published four months earlier.

She came back disappointed, having failed to spot a ringer for the former Elizabeth Bennet among the actresses, aristocrats, royal mistresses and assorted well-married ladies on the gallery walls, which were covered with portraits by Joshua Reynolds. “I can only imagine that Mr. D prizes any picture of her too much to like it should be exposed to the public eye.” Austen wrote jokingly later that evening.

But now, precisely 200 years later, an ambitious online exhibition called “What Jane Saw” will allow modern-day Janeiacs to wander through a meticulous reconstruction of the exhibition and put themselves, if not quite in Austen’s shoes, at least behind her eyes.

“It’s the closest thing to time travel on the Web,” said Janine Barchas, an associate professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, who led the project.

Such time travel is on a lot of Austen fans’ minds in this year of global celebration of the 200th anniversary of “Pride and Prejudice.” And “What Jane Saw,” which went live just before midnight London time on Thursday, can be seen as a scholarly answer to extravagant bicentennial reanimations like the Netherfield ball, the BBC’s recent staging of the dance where Darcy and Elizabeth shared some pivotal banter.

But a reconstruction of the Reynolds show would be of interest, scholars say, even if Austen had never gone anywhere near it. It was the first commemorative museum show dedicated to a single artist, and perhaps the first modern blockbuster, attracting as many as 800 people a day. There were celebrities in the crowd — both Lord Byron and the prince regent attended the red carpet opening — and also on the walls, where the first thing visitors saw were portraits of George III, the reigning monarch, and the theatrical grande dame Sarah Siddons, juxtaposed in an Annie Leibovitz-like array.
The exhibition "was a wonderful moment in the history of celebrity culture," said Joseph Roach, a professor of theater and English at Yale University and the author of "It" (2007), a cultural history of the charisma that distinguishes "abnormally interesting" people. "There was a new kind of royalty emerging."

And Austen, Ms. Barchas said, would have been as interested in that new royalty as any modern reader gobbling up TMZ updates about Kate Middleton and Brangelina. In her recent book, "Matters of Fact in Jane Austen," Ms. Barchas traces the way Austen wove sly nods to actresses, artists, parliamentarians and scandal-ridden aristocrats into her novels — almost "in the spirit of a preteen adorning a bedroom with Justin Bieber posters," as one reviewer put it.

Ms. Barchas’s celebrity-centric reading of Austen is part of a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the worldly, history-minded side of a writer long seen as a country mouse preoccupied with timeless truths. But assembling "What Jane Saw" required meticulousness more typical of construction engineers than of paparazzi.

The gallery, in a building that was subsequently demolished, was recreated using the 3-D modeling software SketchUp, based on precise measurements recorded in an 1860 book. Ms. Barchas and her team then spent a summer working out how the 141 paintings listed in a 20-page pamphlet sold at the exhibition were arranged on the walls, a process that involved a lot of Rubik’s Cube-like playing around.

“I feel pretty sure this is the way the exhibit was actually hung,” Ms. Barchas said.

Seeing the pictures on virtual walls, scholars who have visited the Web site say, reveals juicy "hidden narratives" that the viewers of 1813, including Austen, would have picked up on. Portraits of the prince regent and his mistress, for example, were kept at a discreet remove, while an image of George III was hung cheekily close to a painting based on "King Lear," a play whose performance was essentially forbidden at the time, lest it raise uncomfortable thoughts about the current monarch’s madness.

“You can imagine what it would’ve been like as an early-19th-century viewer of this kind of painting as theater,” said Devoney Looser, an Austen specialist at the University of Missouri (who, perhaps not incidentally, appears in her local roller derby as Stone Cold Jane Austen). “That would have been a really exciting part of life then.”

Ms. Barchas’s team at the university’s Texas Advanced Computing Center is exploring a "gamified" version of the project, involving 3-D goggles that allow full immersion, including an option of bringing viewers' angle of vision in line with Austen's own. (Among the details still to be worked out: was Austen, who was described as tall and slender, closer to 5-foot-4 or 5-foot-8?)
If the notion of a Wii-ready Austen offends purists, others may be happy to see 21st-century technology harnessed in the service of the Divine Miss Jane.

Ms. Barchas recalled a recent conversation with a programmer working on the project’s metadata: "He said, 'O.K., I'm going to go home now and tell my mother-in-law that I have not been wasting all these years working with computers, because now I am working on Jane Austen.'"
In January, the National Book Critics Circle announced that its Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement award for this year would go to the feminist literary scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose collaboration began with *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1979). The award is named after the first president of NBCC, the professional organization for book reviewers, which has about 500 members.

All of NBCC's deliberations are confidential, and in the case of the Sandrof award, the other candidates up for consideration are never announced. Having served a term on the organization's board of directors, I don't think it violates any blood oaths to say that choosing the Sandrof winner was always an unusually perplexing matter. Typically the list of nominees is a mix of authors, editors, and translators -- sometimes with an institution or two, such as a journal or a small press, as well -- who have "made a significant and lasting contribution to American letters."

Reasonable people may disagree about what counts as "significant and lasting," of course. But by the time the nominating committee settles on a choice of candidates, the list is almost excessively impressive. It's almost enough to cause paralysis in people who make judgments for a living. Flip a coin, throw a dart -- it's all good.

So an appropriate response to Gilbert and Gubar winning falls somewhere between "Of course!" and "What took so long?" They not only recovered and analyzed the work of "that damned mob of scribbling women" (in Hawthorne's testosterone-addled turn of phrase) but foregrounded gender-inflected themes and tensions running throughout Victorian and modernist literature.

As Ivan Lett, the online marketing manager for Yale University Press, pointed out in a blog post, "You know a book is of the 'groundbreaking' sort when another one with *Title After Years* (Gilbert and Gubar's 'The Madwoman in the Attic' *After Thirty Years, University of Missouri Press*) comes out, and with the still-changing picture of women, literature, politics, and self-expression within patriarchal culture, it's easily conceivable that another in the same vein would appear in the years ahead."
Barely a week after the NBCC award ceremony in late February, the annual VIDA Count results were released. A coincidence, but one that seems fortuitous: According to its website, VIDA (which “isn’t an acronym, nor does it stand for anything”) was “founded in August 2009 to address the need for female writers of literature to engage in conversations regarding the critical reception of women’s creative writing in our current culture.”

Its most prominent activity, so far, has been to “review the reviews,” so to speak, through its Count—monitoring several of the most prominent print-based venues for book commentary in the U.S. to assess the gender balance in their pages. So far there have been three Counts, and the record demonstrates that the field of critical journalism remains overwhelmingly androcentric. Or, in the vernacular, a sausage fest.

Most books reviewed in major publications are by men. Most of the people writing the reviews are male. In each case the margin is, on the average, roughly two to one. (And it’s a good bet that books by women are assigned to women for review in an even more disproportionate way: a “pink ghetto” of sorts.) The trends are pronounced and, judging by the record, well-entrenched, with little more than flutters of variation across the three years of Count findings.

How to respond to the lopsided situation will be up for debate at a forum called “The VIDA Count and Gender Bias in Book Reviewing,” scheduled for today as part of the Critics Circle’s annual membership meeting. This year the meeting overlaps with Book Expo America, the behemoth publishing trade show. Among the announced panelists for the VIDA discussion is Pamela Paul, the recently named editor of The New York Times Book Review. That’s one way to get the publishing industry’s attention. (A full list of speakers is available here.)

Not every journal that VIDA counts has been selecting authors and reviewers at a rate of two men to each woman. Notable exceptions are The New York Review of Books, The London Review of Books, The New Republic, and the Times Literary Supplement—among the publications with perhaps the greatest role in determining which books and authors are credited as serious or important. In their case, men outnumber women, as authors or reviewers, by roughly three to one.

Why such tremendous disproportion? The possible explanations are various, but not that various. Perhaps women have at most one-half the capacity of men to write significant or attention-worthy books, or to make intelligent assessments of them. (If so, never mind.)

Perhaps everyone making decisions about what to review, and who to have review it, works with no bias whatever. It just happens that the statistics skew that way. In that case, it seems possible, even likely, that there would be an occasional year when the results skewed the other direction.

In the VIDA findings, this happens only twice. But with Granta, the greater balance occurs in a year when the magazine published an issue devoted entirely to women writers. In the case of The Boston Review, the dramatic “surge” in female representation displayed on VIDA’s charts proves to be a kind of optical illusion, resulting from a sharp decline in the number of reviews run in 2011. Both Granta and the Review fell back in line with the general trend by the following year.
Perhaps, finally, there is such a thing as gender bias that tends to operate by default, good intentions notwithstanding, unless specifically recognized and challenged. Which is, most of the time, a difficult and unpleasant thing to do, and very often brings out the worst in people. Any discussion of sexism does. A friend who criticized news coverage of rape was recently threatened online with rape. Given how fundamentally unsurprising that is, VIDA’s efforts will meet resistance of all kinds, from the genteel to the deranged.

Erin Belieu, an associate professor of English at Florida State University, is a founding member of VIDA and will be speaking at the NBCC forum. We discussed the impact of the Count by e-mail as she was preparing to go to New York.

“They Count makes people uncomfortable for a variety of reasons,” she told me, “but first among these, I think, is because it really makes people -- typically well-educated, often self-identified liberally minded people -- look at what are mostly unconscious biases. Self-deception is a peculiarly human attribute, isn’t it? And looking at such things is rarely a self-satisfying feeling. So it feels to some editors and writers that the Count is an attack on this thing -- Literature, with the capital ‘L’ -- they care for so deeply.”

One well-used line of defense is to insist that gender has nothing to do with anything: “When making their editorial choices,” Belieu continued, repeating a familiar claim, “they simply publish ‘the best’ work. Which is of course ridiculous and any smart undergrad could pick that argument apart in 30 seconds. They don’t publish ‘the best,’ as if that were some objective category; they publish what they like. And many literary magazines appear not to generally like work written by women.”

Laurie Muchnick, president of the book critics’ organization, made the point in an even sharper way in a phone interview. Muchnick is currently the book review editor for Bloomberg News, after serving in the same capacity for many years at Newsday. (I worked with her frequently at both publications, though no time recently.)

“The editors,” she said, “have huge multiples of books they can have reviewed. You find you have 50 worthy titles for consideration and 10 slots to fill. If you’re in that position and notice that it keeps turning out that eight of the books you’ve assigned are by men, then maybe have another look at your list to see if you can balance it better. The same thing goes with reviewers.”

In general, Muchnick said, “most book review sections are run top-down, more or less by one powerful person. This isn’t like being in a Fortune 500 company where changing anything is a struggle. The problem is that [most editors] just don’t care. It’s not important enough for them to think about.”

In effect VIDA is continuing Gilbert and Gubar’s project by other means – the work of advocacy needed to challenge an order of exclusion that otherwise gets rationalized all too easily. The NBCC event will be recorded on video by the Center for Fiction for release online. In the meantime, Erin Belieu’s final comment in our exchange seems like a good point to close on:
“Publishers and review editors are always in a position to educate and illuminate their readerships. That's what they're there to do. We have to convince them by whatever means we have available to us that they should do this. Because morally, ethically, spiritually, aesthetically, it's the right thing to do.... There have been more than a few times that men who support VIDA's work have told me explicitly, 'My daughter's in college and she's a fantastic writer. She wants to make this her life. And when I read the VIDA Count it infuriates me to think what's likely to happen to her professionally.’ ”
Mizzou Hosting Big Elderberry Session

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) - The University of Missouri is hosting more than 100 botanists, farmers and food scientists from around the world who share a common interest in the elderberry plant.

The first International Symposium on Elderberry takes place next week in Columbia. Participants will meet during the elderberry's peak flowering season in Missouri.

Scientists at the university's Center for Botanical Interaction Studies are exploring the potential of the antioxidant-rich fruit to combat prostate cancer, stroke and infectious diseases.

Missouri is one of five universities awarded a total of $37.5 million by the National Institutes of Health to explore the possible medical benefits of elderberries, wild yams and other herbal and dietary supplements. Folk healers have long used elderberries to concoct herbal remedies.